

January 31, 2023

Sr. Maria Margarita, the Superior General, of the Congregation to which I belong, **Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary**, recently sent us a letter on the “**ministry of presence**” and the “**ministry of absence**”. Most of us are familiar with the **ministry of presence** but have you ever thought about “**absence**” as a ministry?

I quote from her letter. “We manifest God’s compassion through our desire to be **present** to one another. We show God’s **compassion** when we believe it is worth **being** with another, even if we **cannot** do anything, even if we see no result, even if we see no change.

Many of us feel guilty about **not** being able to do enough for others. We should see them more often, visit them, be present, do more. Little by little our inner life is burdened with guilt. Our life is full of promises that we are unable to keep. We are not with them, but with our sense of guilt. We torture ourselves not to be God. When we leave each other, we recognize that we are human, and that **God alone is God**. Through our **limits**, God’s compassion becomes manifest. Therefore, leaving is not only a **painful awareness** that we cannot do everything, leaving is the **joyful celebration** of a certainty: **God is the one who remains as we go**.

The ministry of presence knows neither age, nor stage of life, nor health nor type of mission. Yet, we **cannot** always be present. Sometimes the reasons are logistical; time and geography do not permit. Sometimes the reasons are that we have multiple pulls on our ministry at the same time. And sometimes the reasons are that we have **nothing** left to give at that moment. At this point **self-care** becomes an imperative rather than merely a good idea.

It is good to visit people who are sick, dying, shut in, handicapped, or lonely. But it is also important **not** to feel guilty when our visits have to be **short** or can only happen **occasionally**. Often we are so apologetic about our limitations that our apologies **prevent** us from **really** being with the other when we are there. **A short time fully present to a sick person is much better than a long time with many explanations of why we are too busy to come more often**.

The **ministry of absence** is the compassionate practice of creating **physical space for God to minister to individuals directly**, without the aid of pastoral mediators. Have you ever thought of this? Sometimes people are uncomfortable being **alone** with God. Our physical presence provides a **comfortable alternative** to **interactions** with the Divine whose touch and voice are far less tangible.

Nouwen suggests times of **intentional absence** whereby people are encouraged to cultivate their **relationship with a God** who speaks in ways **quite different** from his human creations.

To make room for God is to give him entire control of every aspect of your life!

God remains.

